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# STATUS OF PREPARATION OF PUBLICATIONS, STUDIES AND DOCUMENTS FOR THE WORLD CONFERENCE

Letter dated 29 April 1993 from the Permanent Representative of the Republic of Singapore to the Coordinator of the World Conference on Human Rights

I have the honour to request that the attached edited text of the speech by Mr. Kishore Mahbubani, Deputy Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Singapore, at the Conference on "Asian and American Perspectives on Capitalism and Democracy" held in Singapore from 28-30 January 1993, be issued as a document of the fourth session of the Preparatory Committee of the World Conference on Human Rights.

Please note that the speech was delivered in the personal capacity of Mr. Mahbubani and should not be read as a reflection of the Singapore Government's views.

(Signed): K. Kesavapany
Ambassador

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# AN ASIAN PERSPECTIVE ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

## Introduction

1. I would like to begin with an analogy but I apologize to those who may have heard me recount it before. From the viewpoint of many Third World citizens, human rights campaigns often have a bizarre quality. For many of them it looks something like this: They are like hungry and diseased passengers on a leaky, overcrowded boat that is about to drift into treacherous waters, in which many of them will perish. The captain of the boat is often harsh, sometimes fairly and sometimes not. On the river banks stand a group of affluent, well-fed and well-intentioned onlookers. As soon as these onlookers witness a passenger being flogged or imprisoned or even deprived of the right to speak, they board the ship to intervene, protecting the passengers from the captain. But those passengers remain hungry and diseased. As soon as they try to swim to the banks into the arms of their benefactors, they are firmly returned to the boat, their primary sufferings unabated. This is no abstract analogy. It is exactly how the Haitians feel.

2. This is just one of the many absurd aspects of the aggressive Western promotion of human rights at the end of the cold war. There are many others. Yet when I tried in seminars at Harvard University to challenge the universal applicability of democracy, human rights or freedom of the press, I discovered that these values have become virtual "sacred cows". No one could challenge their intrinsic worth. Worse still, when I persisted, I was greeted with sniggers, smug looks and general derision. The general assumption there was that any Asian, especially a Singaporean, who challenges these concepts was only doing so in an attempt to cover up the sins of his Government.

3. I am as convinced now as I was then that the aggressive Western promotion of democracy, human rights and freedom of the press to the Third World at the end of the cold war was and is a colossal mistake. This campaign is unlikely to benefit the 4.3 billion people who live outside the developed world, and perhaps not even the 700 million people who live inside. This campaign could aggravate, instead of ameliorate, the difficult conditions under which the vast majority of the world's population live.

4. But to get this central point into Western minds, one must first remove the barriers that have made these topics into untouchable sacred cows in Western discourse. A Westerner must first acknowledge that when he discusses these topics with a non-Westerner, he is, consciously or unconsciously, standing behind a pulpit. On the eve of the twenty-first century this European attitude towards Asians has to come to an end. The assumption of moral superiority must be abandoned. A level playing field needs to be created for meaningful discussions between Asians and Westerners.

## I. A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

5. To remove the "sacred cow" dimension surrounding the subjects of human rights and freedom of the press, I propose to list a number or heresies which the West has either ignored, suppressed or pretended to be irrelevant or inconsequential in their discussions on these subjects. If these heresies have any validity at all, I hope that this will lead Western writers to accept

that they do not have a monopoly of wisdom or virtue on these subjects and that they should try to exercise a little more humility when they discourse on these subjects to a non-Western audience.

1. A free press need not lead to a well-ordered society

6. A key assumption in the West is that a good society needs a free press to keep abuse of power in check. Freedom of information checks bad government. Its absence leads to greater abuses and bad government. This may well be true. A free press can lead to good government. But this is not necessarily a true proposition. A free press can also lead to bad government.

7. In South-East Asia, we have seen an unfortunate demonstration of this. By far, the one country in South-East Asia that has enjoyed the freest press for the longest period of time (except for the Marcos martial law interregnum) was the Philippines. But the Philippines is also the ASEAN society that is having the greatest difficulty in modernization and economic progress suggesting that a free press is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for development and progress.

8. India and China provide two massive social laboratories to judge what prescriptions would help a society develop and prosper. Between them, they hold about two fifths of the world's population, two out of every five human beings on the planet. Each has taken a very different political road. The West approves the freedom of the press in India, frowns on the lack of it in China. Yet which society is developing faster today and which society is likely to modernize first?

9. The recent Ayodhya incident demonstrated one important new dimension for societies all around the globe. The Indian media tried to control emotional reactions by restricting the broadcasting and distribution of video scenes of the destruction of the mosque. But by now many Indian homes can see video clips (transmitted through satellites and tapes) from foreign news agencies which felt no reason to exercise social, political or moral restraint. Those who happily transmitted the video clips never had to bear the consequences themselves. They were sitting comfortably in Atlanta, Georgia or in Hong Kong, while the riots that followed in India as a result of their TV transmissions never reached their homes. Unfortunately, these media personnel did not stop to consider whether they could have saved other human lives, not their own, by exercising restraint.

2. Western journalists are conditioned by Western prejudices and interests: "objective" reporting is a major falsehood

10. The American media coverage of the Viet Nam War, a major event, some say a glorious chapter, in the history of American journalism. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, as American bodies were brought back from Viet Nam, American public sentiment turned against the war. The United States had to get out. The American media helped to manufacture a justification: that the United States was supporting the "bad guys" (the crooked and wicked Saigon and Phnom Penh regimes) against the "good guys" (the dedicated incorruptible revolutionaries in North Viet Nam or the Cambodian jungles). Books like Fire in the Lake, a glorification of the Vietnamese revolution, became the

bible of American reporters. When the last American soldier left Viet Nam, most American journalists felt satisfied and vindicated.

11. The subsequent communist victories in Cambodia and Viet Nam exposed the true nature of the revolutionaries. The story of the Cambodian genocide is well known, as is the story of the thousands of boat people who perished in the South China Sea. The level of human misery increased, not decreased, after the revolution. Yet virtually no American journalist came forth to admit that perhaps he was wrong in quoting from Fire in the Lake or in calling for the abandonment of the Saigon and Phnom Penh regimes. As long as American journalists had fulfilled vital American interests by saving American lives, there was no need for American journalists to weigh the moral consequences of their actions on non-Americans, the Vietnamese or the Cambodians.

12. Consider the coverage of Tienanmen, a Chinese event that became a global media event. The essential Western media story is that it was a revolution by Chinese democrats against Chinese autocrats. The constant portrayal of the replica of the Statue of Liberty provided the pictorial image for this. Yet for all their massive coverage of Tienanmen, the Western media failed to explain how this event was seen through Chinese eyes. Few Chinese intellectuals believe that China is ready for democracy. Most are as afraid of chaos and anarchy (a persistent Chinese disease) as they are of a return to Maoist totalitarianism. It was a battle between soft authoritarians and hard authoritarians. The Western media vividly reported the apparent victory of the "hard-liners" but it has failed to tell the world the true aftermath: the soft authoritarians have come back to power.

13. During Tienanmen, several Western journalists were blatantly dishonest. They would lunch with a student on a "hunger-strike" before reporting on his "hunger". They were not all bystanders reporting on an event; several advised the students how to behave. None stayed to face the consequences that the students had to face.

14. The biggest indication of how Western journalists are affected by Western interests in their portrayal of China is to compare their reporting of China in the early 1970s with the early 1990s. When President Nixon landed in China in 1972, the American media had a virtual love-fest with a regime that had just killed millions in the cultural revolution. Yet in the 1990s, a much more benign regime that has liberated millions from poverty and indignity and promises to launch them on the road to development is treated as a pariah regime.

3. Western Governments work with genocidal rulers when it serves their interests

15. It was August 1942, a dark moment in World War II. Churchill had flown secretly to Moscow to bring some bad news personally to Stalin: the allies were not ready for a second front in Europe. Stalin reacted angrily. Nancy Caldwell Sorel, in an article in The Atlantic Monthly (November 1991), described that meeting:

> "Discord continued, but on the last evening, when Churchill went to say goodbye, Stalin softened ... the hour that Churchill had planned for

extended to seven. Talk and wine flowed freely, and in a moment of rare intimacy, Stalin admitted that even the stresses of war did not compare to the terrible struggle to force the collective farm policy on the peasantry. Millions of Kulaks had been, well, eliminated. The historian Churchill thought of Burke's dictum, 'If I cannot have reform without justice, I will not have reform', but the politician Churchill concluded that with the war requiring unity, it was best not to moralize aloud."

16. The story elicits a chuckle. What a shrewd old devil Churchill was. How cunning of him not to displease Stalin with mere moralizing. Neither then nor now has Churchill's reputation been sullied by his association with a genocidal ruler. Now change the cast of characters to an identical set: Mrs. Thatcher and Pol Pot. Historically they could have met, but of course they never did. Now try to describe a possible meeting and try to get a chuckle out of it. Impossible? Why so?

17. Think about it. Think hard for in doing so you will discover to your surprise that it is possible for thoughtful and well-informed people to have double standards. If the rule that prevents any possible meeting between Mrs. Thatcher and Pol Pot is that "thou should not have any discourse with a genocidal ruler", then the same rule also forbids any meeting between Stalin and Churchill. Moral rules, as the English philosopher R.M. Hare has stressed, are inherently universalizable. If we do want to allow a meeting between Churchill and Stalin (since, until the last few weeks, no historian has ever condemned Churchill, that must be the prevailing sentiment), then the rule has to be modified to "thou should not have any discourse with a genocidal ruler, unless there are mitigating circumstances".

18. This is not a mere change of nuance. We have made a fundamental leap, a leap best understood with an analogy contained in the following tale: a man meets a woman and asks her whether she would spend the night with him for a million dollars. She replies, "For a million dollars, sure". He says, "How about five dollars?" She replies indignantly "What do you think I am"? He replies, "We have already established what you are. We are only negotiating the price". All those who condone Churchill's meeting with Stalin but would readily condemn any meeting with Pol Pot belong in the woman's shoes (logically speaking).

19. In Stalin's case, as England's survival was at stake, all was excused. In Pol Pot's case, as no conceivable vital Western interest could be met in any meeting with him, no mitigating excuse could possibly exist. Hence the total and absolute Western condemnation of any contact with Pol Pot or his minions in the Khmer Rouge. The tragedy for the Cambodian people is that the West, in applying this absolute moral rule only because its own vital interests were not involved, did not stop to ask whether the sufferings of the Cambodians could have been mitigated if the West had been as flexible in their dealings with the Khmer Rouge as Churchill had been with Stalin.

20. Throughout the 1980s, when several Asian Governments were trying to achieve a viable Cambodian peace settlement (which would invariably have to include the Khmer Rouge), they were vilified for their direct contacts with the Khmer Rouge. American diplomats were instructed never to shake hands with Khmer Rouge representatives.

21. In the last 12 months, the atrocities committed by Radovan Karadzic and his Serbian followers (in full view of the American media) should be sufficient justification to put them in the same league as Pol Pot or Idi Amin. Yet no Western diplomat has hesitated to shake the hands of these Serbian representatives. Is there one standard for Westerners and another for Asians?

4. Western Governments will happily sacrifice the human rights of third world societies when it suits Western interests to do so

22. The current regime in Myanmar overturned the results of the democratic elections in 1990 and brutally suppressed the popular demonstrations that followed. Myanmar was punished with Western sanctions. Asian Governments were criticized for not enthusiastically following suit.

23. The current regime in Algeria overturned the results of the democratic elections in 1992 and brutally suppressed the popular demonstrations that followed. Algeria was not punished with Western sanctions. The Asian Governments have never been provided with an explanation for this obvious double standard.

24. But the reasons are obvious. The fear of Western sanctions triggering off greater political instability, leading to thousands of boat-people crossing the tiny Mediterranean Sea into Europe made the European Community Governments prudent and cautious. Despite this, they have no hesitation in criticizing Asian Governments for exercising the same prudence for the same reasons when it came to applying sanctions against Myanmar or China. Double standards, by any moral criteria, are obviously immoral. How many Western papers have highlighted this?

5. The West has used the pretext of human rights abuses to abandon third world allies that no longer serve Western interests

25. The sins of Siad Barre (Somalia), Mobutu (Zaire) and Arap Moi (Kenya) were as well known during the cold war as they are now. They did not convert from virtue to vice the day the cold war ended. Yet behaviour which was deemed worthy of Western support during the cold war was deemed unacceptable when the cold war ended.

26. It is remarkable how much satisfaction the Western Governments, media and public have taken over their ability finally to pursue "moral" policies after the end of the cold war. Yet this has not come with any admission that the West was (logically speaking) pursuing "immoral" policies during the cold war. Nor has anyone addressed the question whether it is "honourable" to use and abandon allies.

6. The West cannot acknowledge that the pursuit of "moral" human rights policies can have immoral consequences

27. At the end of the Paris International Conference on Cambodia in August 1989, the then Vietnamese Foreign Minister, Nguyen Co Thach, insisted that the Conference declaration should call for a non-return of the genocidal policies and practices of the Khmer Rogue. All present there

knew that Nguyen Co Thach was not really that concerned about Pol Pot's record. (Indeed, Thach once made the mistake of privately confessing to Congressman Stephen Solarz that Viet Nam did not invade Cambodia to save the Cambodian people from Pol Pot, even though this was the official Vietnamese propaganda line.) However, Thach knew that the Khmer Rouge, a party to the Paris conference, would not accept such a reference. Hence the Conference would fail, a failure which the Vietnamese wanted because they were not ready then to relinquish control of Cambodia. Western officials did not dare to challenge him for fear that Nguyen Co Thach would expose them to their own media. At the same time, despite having scuttled a Conference that could have brought peace to Cambodia, Nguyen Co Thach came out smelling good in the eyes of the Western media because he had taken a strong stand against the Khmer Rouge. Yet in practical terms, from the viewpoint of the ordinary Cambodian, the strong Western consensus against the Khmer Rouge had backfired against the Cambodians because it prevented the Western delegations from exposing Nguyen Co Thach's blatant scuttling of the peace conference. Out of good (the Western media condemnation of Pol Pot) came evil (the destruction of a peace conference).

28. The morally courageous thing for a Western delegate to have done at that Paris Conference would have been to stand up in front of the Western media and explain why the inclusion of the Khmer Rouge was necessary if one wanted a peace agreement to end the Cambodians' sufferings. No Western leader even dreamt of doing so, so strong was the sentiment against the Khmer Rouge. This produced a curious contradiction for moral philosophers: the ostensible morally correct position (i.e. of excluding the Khmer Rouge) produced immoral consequences - prolonging the Cambodian agony.

29. Unfortunately, there is no living Western statesman who has the courage to make such a statement, for in the era of "political correctness" that we live in the Western media would excoriate any such brave soul. Out of moral correctness, we have produced moral cowardice.

7. An imperfect Government that commits some human rights violations is better than no government in many societies

30. At least two nation States have broken apart since the end of the cold war, Somalia and Yugoslavia. Both shared a common characteristic of being useful to the West in the cold war. The sins of their Governments were forgiven then. When these ruling regimes were abandoned (each in a different way), the net result has been an increase in human misery. A utilitarian moral philosopher would have no difficulty arguing that the previous situation of imperfect government was a better moral choice because it caused less misery.

31. The inability of the West to accept this can lead to a repetition of Yugoslavia's and Somalia's experiences. Take Peru, for example. It was drifting towards chaos and anarchy. President Fujimori imposed emergency rule to halt the slide. He should have been praised for his courage in taking decisive action to prevent anarchy. However, because the form of his action, a temporary retreat from parliamentary rule, was deemed unacceptable by the West, the beneficial consequences of his action for the Peruvian people was

ignored by the West. In trying to maintain its form of ideological purity, the West was prepared to sacrifice the interests of the Peruvian people.

32. If current Western policies of punishing authoritarian Governments had been in force in the 1960s and 1970s, the spectacular economic growth of Taiwan and South Korea would have been cut off at its very inception by Western demands that the Governments then in power be replaced by less authoritarian regimes. Instead, by allowing the authoritarian Governments, which were fully committed to economic development, to run the full course, the West has brought about the very economic and social changes that have paved the way for the more open and participative societies that Taiwan and South Korea have become. The lessons from East Asia are clear. There are no short cuts. It is necessary for a developing society to first succeed in economic development before it can attain the social and political freedoms found in the developed societies.

## II. ASIAN PERSPECTIVE ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND FREEDOM OF THE PRESS: PRINCIPLES FOR DIALOGUE WITH THE WEST

33. There is no unified Asian view on human rights and the freedom of the press. These are Western concepts. Asians are obliged to react to them. Predictably, there is a whole range of reactions ranging from those who subscribe to these concepts in toto to those who reject them completely. An understanding of the Asian reactions is clouded by the fact that many Asians feel an obligation to pay at least lip service to their values. For example, many Japanese intellectuals, who remain children of the Meiji restoration in their belief that Japan should become more Western than Asian, proclaim their strong adherence to Western values on human rights, although they have a curious inability to discuss Japan's record in the Second World War in the same breadth. From New Delhi to Manila, to name just two cities, there are many strong and sincere believers in these values. But in most Asian societies there is little awareness, let alone understanding, of these concepts. The essential truth is that the vast continent of Asia, preoccupied with more immediate challenges, has not had the time or energy to address these issues squarely.

34. I shall therefore make no pretence of speaking on behalf of Asia, although I am reasonably confident that my views will not be dismissed as eccentric by most Asians. My hope today is to find some credible middle ground where both Asians and Westerners can have a dialogue as equals and with equally legitimate points of view. I will be so bold as to venture five principles that should guide such a discourse.

### 1. Mutual respect

35. The first principle that I want to stress is all discussions between Asians and Westerners on the subject of human rights and freedom of the press should be based on mutual respect. I have visited the offices of four great American newspapers, the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times and the Wall Street Journal. In any one of the four, if you ventured out of their offices at night and strayed a few hundred yards off course, you would be putting your life in jeopardy. Yet, despite this, none of the editorial desks or writers would argue in favour of the reduction of the civil

liberties of habitual criminals. Danger from habitual crime is considered an acceptable price to pay for no reduction in liberty. This is one social choice.

36. In Singapore, you can wander out at night in any direction from the Straits Times and not put your life in jeopardy. One reason for this is that habitual criminals and drug addicts are locked up, often for long spells, until they have clearly reformed. The interests of the majority in having safe city streets is put ahead of considerations of rigorous due process, although safeguards are put in place to ensure that innocent individuals are not locked up. This is another kind of social choice. Let me suggest that none is intrinsically superior. Let those who make the choice live with the consequences of their choice. Similarly, if this statement can be received without the usual Westerns sniggers, let me add that a city that bans the sale of chewing gum has as much a moral right to do so as a city that effectively allows the sale of crack on its streets. Let us try to avoid the knee-jerk smug response that one choice is more moral than the other.

37. I do not want to belabour this point but it will be psychologically difficult for the West to accept the motion that alternative social and political choices can deserve equal respect. For 500 years, the West has been dominant in one form or another. After the Second World War, most of Asia, like much of the Third World, was politically emancipated. But the process of mental emancipation, both on the part of the colonized and the colonizers, is taking much longer. This explains why Chris Patten can march into Hong Kong, five years before its date of return to China and suggest a form of government that is completely unacceptable to China. The British would be shocked if a Chinese Governor were to arrive in Northern Ireland and dictate terms for its liberation from the United Kingdom. But they see nothing absurd in what they are doing in Hong Kong. The British, like many in the West, feel that they have a right to dictate terms to Asians.

38. Eventually, as East Asia becomes more affluent, the discussions will take place from a position of equality. But forums like ours can anticipate this by trying to create a form of discourse in which we approach each other with mutual respect.

2. Economic development

39. Secondly, the fundamental concern of Western proponents of human rights is to remove egregious abuses and improve the living conditions of the 4.3 billion people who live outside the developed world. Let me suggest that the current Western campaign (even if it is rigorously carried out, which it is unlikely to be) will make barely a dent on the lives of the 4.3 billion people, although there will be symbolic victories like the Aquino revolution and the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Aung San Suu Kyi.

40. There is only one force that has the power to "liberate" the Third World. Economic development is probably the most subversive force created in history. It shakes up old social arrangements and paves the way for the participation of a greater percentage of society in social and political decisions. The Chinese Communist Party can no longer regain the tight totalitarian control it enjoyed in Mao Zedong's time. Deng Xiaoping's reforms have killed that

possibility. Hence, if the West wants to bury forever Mao's totalitarian arrangements, it should support Deng's reforms to the hilt, even if he has to occasionally crack down to retain political control. The fundamental trend is clear. It is therefore not surprising that 3½ years after Tienanmen, it is the "soft" and not the "hard" authoritarians who are in charge in Beijing.

41. Unfortunately, the promotion of economic development (unlike the promotion of democracy and human rights) is difficult. It has significant costs, direct and indirect, for developed societies. What may be good for the Third World (promoting economic development) would prove painful for Western societies in the short run. The European Community, United States and Japan, for example, would have to abandon their massive agricultural subsidies. Unfortunately (and paradoxically) the very nature of Western democratic societies (which inhibits politicians from speaking about sacrifices) may well be one of the biggest barriers to the effective spread of democracy and human rights in the Third World, including Asia.

3. Work with existing Governments

42. Third, do not even dream of overthrowing most of the existing Governments in Asia. I say this because I was present at a lynching at Harvard, the lynching of the Indonesian Government. This was at a forum organized at the Kennedy School of Government to discuss the unfortunate killings in Dili in November 1991. Two American journalists who had a close shave in the incident, were there to present a vivid first-hand accounts and whip up the crowd to a frenzy, with the help of a few leftist critics of the Indonesian Government. This left a hapless State Department official to explain why the United States should continue working with the Suharto Government. If the people in that room had the power to depose the Indonesian Government, they would have done it instantly, without paying a thought to the horrendous consequences that might follow. This is the attitude of many human rights activists: get rid for the imperfect Governments we know - do not worry about the consequences that may follow. On their own, such activists will probably cause little trouble. But when they get into positions of influence, their ability to cause real damage increases by leaps and bounds.

43. In dealing with Asia, I am calling on the West to take the long view. These are societies which have been around hundreds, if not thousands of years. They cannot be changed overnight, even if, for example, Fang Lizhi is elected President of China. The experience of President Aquino should provide a vivid lesson to those who believe that one change at the top can reform everything.

44. What Asia needs at its present stage of development are Governments which are committed to rapid economic development. Fortunately these are quite a few, ranging across a wide political spectrum, from the communist societies of China and Viet Nam, the military-dominated societies of Thailand and Indonesia to the democratic societies of South Korea, Taiwan and Malaysia. All are experiencing rapid economic growth. They should be rewarded and encouraged (if only to act as a model for others). Sporadic instances of political crackdowns should be criticized but these Governments should not be

penalized as long as their people's lives are improving. Only societies like North Korea and Myanmar, which have let their people stagnate for decades, deserve such disapproval.

4. Establish minimal codes of civilized conduct

45. To a Western human rights activist, the suggestion that he should be a little moderate in making human rights demands on non-Western societies seems almost as absurd as the notion that a woman can be partially pregnant. In psychological attitudes, such an activist is no different from a religious crusader of a previous era. He demands total conversion and nothing else. Such activists can do a lot of damage with their zealotry. Unfortunately, since they occupy the high moral ground in Western societies, no Government nor media representative dares to challenge them openly.

46. But some of the demands of these human rights activists would be unacceptable under any conditions. Most Asian societies would be shocked by the sight of gay rights activists on their streets. And, in most of them, if popular referendums were held, they would vote overwhelmingly in favour of the death penalty and censorship of pornography.

47. But both Asians and Westerners are human beings. They can agree on minimal standards of civilized behaviour that both would like to live under. For example, there should be no torture, no slavery, no arbitrary killings, no disappearances in the middle of the night, no shooting down of innocent demonstrators, no imprisonment without careful review. These rights should be upheld not only for moral reasons. There are sound functional reasons. Any society which is at odds with its best and brightest and shoots them down when they demonstrate peacefully, as Myanmar did, is headed for trouble. Most Asian societies do not want to be in the position that Myanmar is in today, a nation at odds with itself.

48. If the West is convinced that its systems of human rights and freedom of the press are the best possible systems for any society around the globe, let the virtues of these systems speak for themselves. As in the world of ideas, if a social system has merits, it will fly on its own wings. If it does not, it will not. Most Asians now know enough of these systems to make their own choices. Let them do so in peace.

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